

Letters Bring Alive the Mom She Never Knew

Daughter's Inheritance Proved More Valuable than Money

Actress and playwright Kim Russell was an adult when she finally got to know her mother, who died when Russell was just 2 months old.

Her father, Bernard Knighten, never spoke of his first wife, Luana.

"He never shared stories, never said I looked like her, unless prompted to by my aunts," says Russell, education coordinator for the Smith Center for the Performing Arts in Las Vegas and author of "Tuskegee Love Letters," www.tuskegeeloveletters.com.

Eventually, though, he shared with her some letters he and Luana exchanged as young newlyweds during World War II. Bernard had been a Tuskegee Airman, one of the first 15 pilots in the pioneering all-African American flying squadron based in Tuskegee, Ala. Before its creation in 1941, blacks were not allowed to fly in the military.

Bernard was 23. In letters to Luana and his mother-in-law, he's cocky, funny and clearly smitten with his beautiful wife. Luana, 21, was a bright and educated stenotypist from St. Louis discovering a completely foreign way of life in the Deep South.

"This Tuskegee is the dirtiest place in the country," she wrote to her mother. "You have taught me that everything in the world was nice and clean, or at least being around you, you have made things seem so, and it really hurts to find out that life isn't really like that."

Mostly, though, Luana's letters reveal a kind, brave young bride trying not to worry too much about her handsome husband flying over German artillery in Africa.

"It must be an awful shock to receive a brief telegram telling you the one person you love most is gone and that you will never see them again," she wrote Bernard after learning a friend was missing in action. "Please honey, see that I won't get one of those telegrams."

For his part, Bernard worked to keep his letters light.

"My bed is quite uncomfortable and I can't sleep, thus I dream of you all night long," he wrote to Luana. "I miss the sleep but thinking of you is better than whiskey or vitamin pills. Hmmm, I'd better change that to just vitamin pills."

Russell compiled the letters her father had shared into a readers theater play. Her dad attended a performance.

"He was tickled," Russell recalls. "He laughed at the right places."

Four years later, after he died in 2000, he had another surprise for her: hundreds more letters he'd saved from his 13-year marriage. It was the best inheritance she could ever have hoped for, Russell says.

“Growing up, I had a wonderful, loving family, but I felt different, like an orphan or an adopted child, because I never knew my mother,” she says. “When you lose a parent at an early age, what does that make you?”

“I am so grateful my father saved all of those letters and I encourage anyone who’s lost a loved one to write their story, save their diaries and letters, blogs or videos. I know my mother now – she was an actress, a photographer, a dreamer – and I absolutely adore her. I see so much of me in her.”

About Kim Russell

Kim Russell is an arts administrator, writer, and performance artist best known for her one-woman show, “Sojourner Truth.” She has a bachelor’s in theater and mass communications and an master’s in business. She’s currently working on a book incorporating many more of the letters she inherited. To see Bernard’s TV debut as a comedian on BET ComicView at about age 70, visit www.jaybernardcomedy.com.